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Close Reading Workshop

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Close Reading Workshop

Abstract

Close reading is an in-depth analysis of a text's features (e.g., syntax, punctuation, tone, and vocabulary) to acquire a comprehensive understanding of a piece of literature. At the National Council of Teachers of English Conference in 2001, Robert Scholes, a retired professor of English at Brown University, voiced his concern about the lack of ability in freshly enrolled college students to engage with the intricacy of texts. Jane Gallop, Professor of English at University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, further argues the interdisciplinary benefits of close reading and attests to the consequences of students' inability to perform intense reading of literature. As a student in the undergraduate department of English at the University of Rhode Island (URI), I notice a similar lack of close reading skills in my peers. My peers struggle to use the text as evidence in their arguments. In addition, I observe that the absence of developed close reading skills limits students' capability to properly interpret and engage with texts in a multidimensional and dynamic manner. Most importantly, I notice the effects of undeveloped close reading skills on students' academic success.

Assessment of Close Reading Skills at the University of Rhode Island

I conducted close reading workshops to address the lack of close reading skills in the URI student body. The workshop collected scientific data to test my observation that the URI student body has insufficient close reading skills, and also collected data on the effectiveness of the workshop itself. The objectives of the workshop were to a) measure current close reading skills in the subjects, b) promote the practice of close reading skills, and c) re-measure the students' close reading abilities after attending the workshop to determine the workshop's effectiveness. 60 students attended the workshops. In the workshop, students read a piece of poetry together and then completed a survey to test their comprehension of the text. Afterwards, the students closely read the text with the coordinator and then retook the same survey again to measure any differences in students' comprehension of the text before and after the close reading workshop.

Close reading is the ability to be sensitive to the intricate details in order to reach a deep, comprehensive understanding of the text. Close reading directs a reader away from surface reading and plot summary to the thematic argument of the text. Authors of complex text put complicated thoughts on paper and expect to engage the reader in deep thinking that transcends the words on the pages. Certain elements such as vocabulary, abstract ideas, syntax, figurative language, et cetera allow a text to hold sophisticated thought. Close reading is the act of analyzing the language and the grammar of a given text. The field of English became a profession largely due to the art of close reading. Today, scholars have noticed a prominent lack of close reading skills in college students. Students need to be taught the art of close reading and its importance because its benefits are applicable across a variety of disciplines in addition to English. Students need to learn about close reading, the texts that are eligible for close reading,

the features that allow a text to hold complicate thought, and the universal appeal of close reading.

Close reading engages the reader in deep, reflective thinking about the text's meaning and allows the reader to critically analyze the text. It is easy to comprehend the plot story of a text but it is a skill to be able to discern with what intentions, nuances and connotations that author is presenting the plot story. Such skill allows a reader to be able to discern the author's argument and allow the reader to respond to the author's argument.

Close reading is a skill that is achieved through practice and rereading texts "in order to develop a deep, precise understanding of [a] text"¹. Mastering the art of close reading allows students to successfully handle complex texts and to rely on the text to provide evidence and support for their comprehension and critical analysis of the text.

A text has to be complex in order to be close read. Every text does not have the capacity to be close read because it genuinely lacks complexities. Beth Burke argues that readers cannot read the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and expect it to engage the reader in critical thinking¹. Such simple texts lack complexities because they are comprised of simple plot, syntax and vocabulary that require no deep thinking in order to be comprehended. After reading them, the reader is not inspired to think about complicated ideas that transcend the text or even the reader itself. Complex texts that are worthy of close reading leave the reader pondering issues, concepts, ideas and/or principles that transcend boundaries. Complex texts demand rereading because close reading "enable students to gain new insight into the text each time they read it...because its

¹ Burke, Beth. "A Look at Close Reading and Text Dependent Questions." Phoenix Union Social Studies. Accessed April 3, 2016.
[http://www.phoenixunion.org/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=17677&dataid=19902&FileName=Social Studies CCSS Literacy Resource 2013-2014.pdf](http://www.phoenixunion.org/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=17677&dataid=19902&FileName=Social%20Studies%20CCSS%20Literacy%20Resource%202013-2014.pdf).

structure and/or ideas are complex”². In addition to crossing boundaries, Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey define complex texts as “those that allow readers to reflect on themselves and their actions; invite them in the worlds of others; understand the biological, social, or physical world; ...develop their literary prowess and become informed citizens”^{2,3}. Therefore, complex texts are didactic in nature because they engage close readers in critical thought, analysis and comprehension.

Certain features such as vocabulary and syntax allow a text to hold sophisticated thought. According to Nelson, Perfetti, Liben, and Liben, vocabulary and syntax play a major role in determining a text’s complexity⁴. There are two types of vocabulary that increase a text’s sophistication: academic and/or subject-related vocabulary and tier-2 vocabulary^{1,2}. Subject-related vocabulary pertains to a given subject matter. Tier-2 vocabularies are difficult words that embody subtle and/or particular meaning and are able to be used in a variety of contexts, which results in an enrichment of a text. Syntax, on the other hand, complicates a text by its “sentence length, balance of simple, compound, complex, or incomplete sentences, use of passive voice or nominalization, repetition...[and/or] changes in verb tense”². Vocabulary and syntax are further complicated through implied themes, irony, ambiguity, abstract ideas, and/or figurative language². Features such as these successfully cultivate a text’s intricacy.

The following foundational strategies allow a reader to handle a complex text’s intricacy.

² Jones, Barbara, Sandy Chang, Margaret Heritage, and Glory Tobiason. "Supporting Students in Close Reading." *The Center On Standards & Assessment Implementation*, 2014, 3-17. Accessed April 3, 2016. [http://www.csai-online.org/sites/default/files/resource/38/Supporting Students in Close Reading.pdf](http://www.csai-online.org/sites/default/files/resource/38/Supporting%20Students%20in%20Close%20Reading.pdf).

³ Fisher, Douglas, and Nancy Frey. "Engaging the Adolescent Learner: Text-Dependent Questions." *International Reading Association*, April 2012, 2-5. Accessed April 3, 2016. [https://education.illinoisstate.edu/downloads/casei/4-02A-Engaging fisher.pdf](https://education.illinoisstate.edu/downloads/casei/4-02A-Engaging%20fisher.pdf).

⁴ Nelson, Jessica, Charles Perfetti, David Liben, and Meredith Liben. "Measures of Text Difficulty: Testing Their Predictive Value for Grade Levels and Student Performance." 2011, 40-50. Accessed April 3, 2016. [http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2012/Measures ofText Difficulty_final.2012.pdf](http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2012/Measures%20of%20Text%20Difficulty_final.2012.pdf).

The reader conducts close reading by being sensitive to the text's features such as word choice, syntax, form, structure, and patterns. Additionally, a reader can close read by paying close attention to short passages, rereading the text, and thinking about the information that a reader finds confusing or difficult to understand. In addition to these foundational close reading strategies, Burke argues that encouraging readers to ask text-dependent questions also enhances text comprehension ¹. Text-dependent questions are formed by the text and can only be answered by referring back to the text. Thus, a reader is encouraged to use the text as evidence to answer questions. Patricia Kain recommends reading with a pencil in hand in order to take notes while reading the text⁵. A reader should underline the key words and/or phrases. A beginner should begin to notice key words by being sensitive to anything he/she finds surprising, important or contradictory. A reader should make effort to take notes in the margins, and should encourage noting even the slightest of observations. When readers learn to engage with texts in such a manner, it forces the reader to be sensitive to a text's details and also to think about the author's argument. A reader can further close read by paying attention to repetition, contradictions, paradoxes and similarities in the text. A reader versed in working with such techniques is able to actively engage in close reading.

The skill of close reading in the field of humanities, English in particular, is a foundational step that allows a reader to become a critic. The importance of close reading in English as a discipline is the ability to be accurately able to analyze various possible interpretations besides a simplistic comprehension of plot summary of a text. In addition, Jane Gallop highlights the benefits of close reading to other fields: "students trained in close reading have been known to apply it to diverse sorts of texts-newspaper articles, textbooks in other

⁵ Kain, Patricia. "How to Do a Close Reading." *Harvard College Writing Center*. 1998. Accessed April 3, 2016. <http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/how-do-close-reading>.

disciplines, [and] political speeches...this enhanced, intensified reading can prove invaluable for many kinds of jobs as well as in their lives"⁶. The skill to be able to look deep within something for its authentic meaning is a universally applicable skill. Close readers are not only better writers and readers, but also better perceivers of the world and the variety of scholarly discourses that define the world⁶. However, Robert Scholes argues that in contemporary academia, "we have a reading problem of massive dimensions"⁷. Students fail to hone their focus on the language of the text. Students, instead of letting the language direct their understanding of the text, forcibly plaster on the text what they think it should be saying. Scholes quotes Tamar Katz, an associate professor of English at Brown University who states that the skills most high school graduates lack is close reading. In addition to being inattentive and/or oblivious to the intricacies of the text, Katz argues that students let their previous "historical knowledge and generic concepts" prevent them from being sensitive to the details of the text⁷. The need to readdress the importance of close reading is strong because a significant number of students have become oblivious to the art of close reading and its universal benefits.

Methods

As a senior in the undergraduate department of English at the University of Rhode Island, I noticed a similar lack of close reading skills in my peers. As a result, I decided to conduct workshops about close reading. The two goals of the workshop are to assess the level of close reading skills in the student sample and to promote close reading. The structure of the workshop is comprised of the following: a) reading a piece of text together, b) taking the pre-survey about the text, c) conducting the workshop, and d) re-taking the same survey again. The chosen text is

⁶ Gallop, Jane. "The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading". *Profession*. Modern Language Association, 2007. 181–86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25595865>.

⁷ Scholes, R. "The Transition to College Reading." *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 2, no. 2 (2002): 165-72.

Mary Robinson's "London's Summer Morning." The workshop chose a difficult piece of poetry on purpose in order to ask the sample how do they handle difficult texts. After taking the pre-survey, the three basic strategies to handle difficult texts were discussed. The first strategy is to understand the vocabulary of the text. The vocabulary is not limited to words the reader does not know but includes words that the reader thinks he knows. Often, an assumption of the possible definition behind a word can hinder a text's comprehension because the definition could be wrong or could have multiple meanings. Students also make the mistake of relying entirely on the context to understand unknown words. Thus, a firm understanding of the text's vocabulary is the first step in textual comprehension and analysis. Second, a reader asking him/herself questions about the information that is confusing, interesting, or repetitive instead of skipping over them specifically shows the reader exactly which part of the text they do not understand. It shows them where to begin to understand an overwhelmingly difficult text. Third, a technique called "parking your thoughts" in which one reads with a utensil in hand and writes down every observation, confusion, or interesting elements about the text. This helps to remember important information that one can easily forget after finishing reading. After discussing these basic strategies, the workshop close read an example from the text with the students. Afterwards, the students were divided in small groups and close read another example from the text on their own. Then, the workshop and students got back together to review the example as a class. Then, the students re-took the survey. The survey included twelve questions in total. Two questions pertain to student information while two questions are about close reading. Six questions are about the context of the poem, and two questions request feedback from the students in regards to the workshop. Following is the survey the workshop used (correct answers are bolded):

1) What year are you in?

- a. _____
- 2) What is your intended major?
- a. _____
- 3) Which of the following options most accurately describes close reading?
- a. Close reading is to identify with the characters in a text by being sensitive to syntax, tone, et cetera.
- b. Close reading is an in-depth analysis of a text's features such as syntax, tone, et cetera.**
- c. Close reading is using preexisting historical and conceptual information to analyze a text.
- 4) Why is close reading important?
- a. Proper attention to the plot summary allows a structured, deeper and directed comprehension of the texts.
- b. Efficient attention to a text's features allows a deeper, accurate and enriching relationship with texts.**
- c. Close reading allows a reader to understand the author's intentions behind writing the text.
- 5) Describe the plot summary of "London's Summer Morning."
- a. The author is describing a busy day in a beautiful city.
- b. The author is describing the everyday hustle of an industrialized city.**
- c. The author is describing the different types of sounds in a city.
- 6) The poem engages with which of the following physical senses:
- a. Visual

- b. Auditory
 - c. Gustatory (sense of taste)
 - d. A, B and C**
- 7) The poem explore which class system:
- a. Middle class
 - b. Aristocracy
 - c. Peasants**
- 8) How does the auditory imagery help the reader identify the jobs of the characters within the poem?
- a. Auditory imagery describes the sounds the occupations generate.**
 - b. Auditory imagery gives an official description of the occupations.
 - c. Auditory imagery only aims to describe the sounds located within a city.
- 9) What is the weather like in the poem?
- a. The weather is mild.
 - b. The weather is oppressively hot.**
 - c. The weather is warm.
- 10) How does the poem explore the hygiene and/or pollution of the industrial revolution?
- a. The businesses keep the roads clean *i.e.* “the fresh-sprinkled pavement...”
 - b. Industrial revolution spreads pollution chronically *i.e.* “the fresh-sprinkled pavement cools the feet of early walkers.”**
 - c. Industrial revolution is hygienic and polluting at the same time.
- 11) What did you like about the workshop?
- 12) What could have been done differently?

After taking the pre-survey, the workshop discussed the chosen text together. Following is a close reading of Robinson's "London's Summer Morning."

Robinson's "London's Summer Morning" and the Industrial Revolution

Mary Robinson's "London's Summer Morning" (1800) sets up a graphic picture of a morning in the city of London and the hustle of the city as it drifts into consciousness. However, the poem conveys a much deeper argument about the society of London during the times of the industrial revolution. The poem argues the effects of the industrial revolution on the environment. The poet uses specific terminology and adjectives to differentiate natural climate versus man-made atmosphere. In addition, the poem demonstrates the influence of the industrial revolution on the class system and on humanity. The industrial revolution dehumanizes people because the material object is appreciated more than the human life. The poem argues that the industrial revolution negatively influences the environment, the class system and dehumanizes people by placing an emphasis on materialism instead of the people.

The poem argues the effects of the industrial revolution on the environment (Robinson, line 1-3; 9; 16-21):

Who has not waked to list the busy sounds
Of summer's morning, in the sultry smoke
Of noisy London?...
the street is lost in clouds impervious.
...And the fresh-sprinkled pavement cools the feet
Of early walkers.
...Now the sun
Darts burning splendor on the glittering pane

Robinson's contemporaries and the eighteenth-century scholarly discourse largely concentrated on the subject of nature⁸. Robinson also starts her poem with the words "summer's morning" that

⁸ Williams, George G. "The Beginnings of Nature Poetry in the Eighteenth Century". *Studies in Philology* 27.4 (1930): 583–608.

falsely leads the reader to assume that the poem is about nature. However, as the poet slowly drifts into consciousness and is "waked," he completely changes the tone of the poem. Abruptly, the "summer's morning" is now the "sultry smoke of noisy London." The words "sultry smoke" convey the aggravation of temperature due to industrial activities. While the poet uses the word "summer" to convey the naturally warm temperature due to the season, the adjective "sultry" is used to describe the "smoke." According to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, the definition of "sultry" is "oppressively hot and moist"⁹. The poet uses the word "sultry" that has oppressive connotations to describe the man-made "smoke" because the poet realizes the effects of industrial activities on society. The phrase "street is lost in clouds impervious" further supports the argument. The words "clouds impervious" is implying to the dusty fog causes by the movement of various trades and occupations in the street. The phrase highlights the unnatural characteristic of industrial activities: the activities of man is creating the foginess instead of nature. "Clouds impervious" is also a metaphor that highlights the nature of the man-made fog in London's society. According to the *OED*, "impervious" is "not to be passed through or penetrated"¹⁰. The business is nevertheless continuing even if the "clouds," which is fog or dustiness, is thick enough to the point that it is impregnable. The metaphor of "clouds" yields two implications. First, the metaphor implies that the beauty of London has been overcome by the pollution of the industrial activities because no one can appreciate the beauty of London with clarity due to the "clouds impervious." The words "noisy London" further support the argument because the words "who has not waked to list" implies that the poet lives in London and yet the adjective "noisy" is used to describe London instead of an endearment. Secondly, it implies that people must continue to carry out their business even if they cannot see with clarity because their survival

⁹ "sultry, adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 24 March 2016.

¹⁰ "impervious, adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 24 March 2016.

depends on their occupations. Additionally, the poet uses repetition to strengthen the argument. The sun and its "darts burning splendor on the glittering pane" again convey the poet's attitude towards natural climate versus man-made climate. While the smoke that is caused by man is "sultry," and causes "clouds impervious," the sun and its natural heat is given romantic connotations through the word "splendor." Although the sun is also "burning," the poet endears the sunlight and the heat caused by the sun through the word "splendor" because the word has the meaning of "brilliant distinction, eminence or glory" in it¹¹ Furthermore, while the city is "lost" due to man-made "clouds impervious," the sunlight is given aesthetic connotations of gleaming and sparkling in the words "glittering pane." The use of the word "splendor" and "glittering pane" is prominent because the poet does not use such endearing terminology to describe the environmental changes caused by the industrial activities.

Industrial revolution exerts influence in the class system of London in addition to the environment (line 17-19):

...At the private door
The ruddy housemaid twirls the busy mop,
Annoying the smart 'prentice, or neat girl,
Tripping with band-box lightly.

"Annoying" is the main word in the block quotation that conveys the arrogance cultivated by the industrial revolution within the class system. The "housemaid" is doing her job within the "private" residence with rigor. The poet describes the housemaid's sincerity to her job through "ruddy," and the "busy mop." The housemaid is working with such zeal that her face has become "ruddy," a healthy red color, in response to her fervent movements. Furthermore, the housemaid is working hard to the point that even the mop is personified in the words "busy mop."

¹¹ . "splendour, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 25 March 2016.

Nevertheless, the "'prentice," instead of appreciating the housemaid's diligent work, is "annoy[ed]" by the "busy mop." This conveys to the reader the lack of tolerance level in those who are not "smart" and/or unable to engage in the industrial discourse of the day. The "'prentice" is not even a highly educated person but rather a person in training. While the housemaid is "ruddy" from working hard, the "neat girl" is playing with the "band-box lightly." Just because the neat girl is more educated than the housemaid, her attitude towards the housemaid is disrespectful. Although the housemaid is only doing her job, the neat girl beholds her as "annoying" only because her "busy mop" is inconvenient. Consequently, the industrial revolution influences one's place in the social ladder within London.

The industrial revolution dehumanizes people because the revolution cultivates materialism and holds the material object in a higher regard than the people. Witness the materialistic society of London in the following block quotation:

...now the sun
Darts...save where the canvas awning throws a shade
On the gay merchandise. Now, spruce and trim,
In shops (where beauty smiles with industry)
Sits the smart damsel...

The materialistic nature of the London's society is best parsed out through the comparison between the different types of terminology that is being used in the poem. The occupations that are not financially strong enough to engage in the materialistic discourse are depicted as miserable. In line 39, the porter is "bear[ing]" his load instead of carrying it. The child in line 4 is "shrilly" calling out "his trade" despite the fact that his clothes are "tattered." Even the poet calls himself "poor" in line 42 because his poetry does not earn him riches and thus, he himself cannot participate in London's materialism. The terminology of "bearing," "shrilly," and "poor" bring out London's materialism because no such terminology is used to describe the material objects in

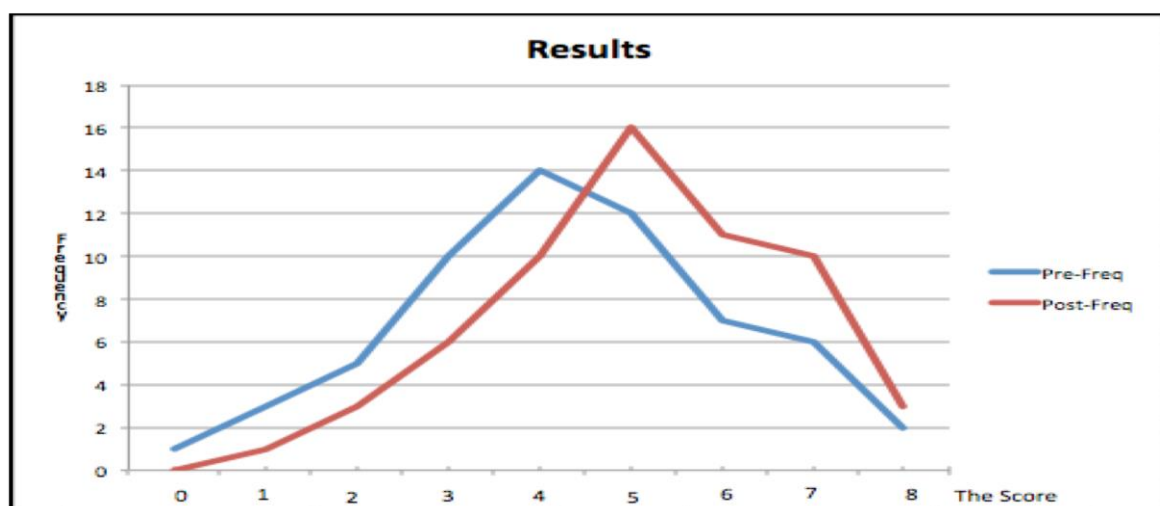
the poem. While people such as the porter and the child have to work outside in the "dart[ing]" sun, it is the material objects, the "gay merchandise" that gets the "shade." The "canvas...save[s]" the merchandise while the people are risking their health to survive. Furthermore, it is the "merchandise," who is "gay" instead of the people of London. No such words are used to describe people such as the poet and the porter because they cannot participate in London's materialism. Repetition also strengthens the argument that the London society places material over men. The "shop" is "spruce and trim" while words such as "tattered" and "shrilly bawls his trade" convey child abuse and child labor within the London society. The material objects are taken care of while children are left to survive on their own. The adjectives convey to the reader that what is important to London is gaining and securing the material objects no matter at what cost. In addition, the concept of beauty dehumanizes people in the block quotation. Throughout the poem, "beauty" is only granted next to the material object *i.e.* "where beauty smiles with industry." This conveys to the reader that unless one actively participates within the materialistic industry, the London society will not behold him/her as beautiful. If this rule is practically applied, then the poem is arguing the fault within the London's society to not hold people such as the porter, the housemaid and the child as beautiful. The rule has limited the concept of beauty to the acquisition of the material object. If one can "smile...with industry," then he/she is beautiful otherwise beauty is not granted. Therefore, the industrial revolution engages with materialism in a manner as to dehumanize humanity.

A surface reading of Mary Robinson's "London's Summer Morning" will present the hustle of an industrialized city comprised of various trades and products. However, the terminology of the poem demonstrates the true nature of the London society. The poet demonstrates the influence of the industrial revolution on the atmosphere of London, the class

system and the dehumanization of the people, as the material object is valued more than the humans.

Results

The data from the pre/post survey is charted on a line graph. The y-axis shows the frequency that is comprised of the number of students who scored a certain score while the x-axis shows the score. The number of total participants was 60 students. The possible score can range from zero correct answers to eight correct answers. The data demonstrates that the students performed better on the survey after the workshop:



The data is normally distributed. The number of students in the sample was 60. In consultation with Angela Darosh, a clinical psychology Ph.D. student at the University of Rhode Island, a paired t-test was conducted to further analyze the data. The t-test demonstrated that the mean score prior to the workshop is 4.32 (SD=1.809) while the post surveys demonstrated a mean score of 5.08 (SD=1.619). The t-test also analyzed whether the difference was significant, which answers the question of whether the improvements in the students is due to chance or the workshop. The result of the paired t-test were $t(59) = -3.098$, $p=0.003$. The significance rate of

$p=.003$ shows there is a .003 percent chance that the improvements in the students are due to coincidental. The data analysis allows being 99.7 % certain that the improvement is due to the workshop. The effect size is 0.47, which is a medium effect. In addition, the data and the results are statistically significant because the number of students tested were enough (60) to prove that close reading workshop succeeded in improving the skill in the sample.

Discussion

My project demonstrates that the student sample did not have sufficient close reading skills that in return resulted in poor text comprehension. However, students' comprehension improved significantly through the close reading workshop. This demonstrates that students have the capacity to learn and practice close reading skills. Therefore, the topic of close reading definitely needs to be further addressed among college students. If close reading is taught properly, college students will easily grasp and begin to use the skill of close reading in order to perform intensified readings of any text from any discipline.

